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in Louise Erdich's
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An Ojibway Metamorphosis: June as Sweetheart Calico
in Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*

by

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A Thesis

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in

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Abstract of "An Ojibway Metamorphosis:
June as Sweetheart Calico in Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*"

In this thesis paper I examine the intricacies of Louise Erdrich's fiction which suggest that June Morrissey Kashpaw is reincarnated as Sweetheart Calico in Erdrich's 1998 novel, *The Antelope Wife*. June dies in Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984, 1993). But at one point in *Love Medicine* June's former husband, Gordie Kashpaw, sees a dead deer assume the shape of June in the backseat of his car. Though June has died, she seems to reappear periodically throughout Erdrich's fiction.

In her latest novel, Erdrich writes about a woman named Sweetheart Calico who becomes Klaus Shawano's antelope wife. Klaus spots four classy antelope-women at a flea market on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana. After consulting Jimmie Badger on how to capture antelope-women, Klaus continues his pursuit of the mother of the other three, ignoring Jimmie Badger's warning about the danger of pursuing antelope women.

Repeatedly Sweetheart Calico bears resemblance to June Morrissey Kashpaw in the various modes in which she appears throughout the body of Erdrich's fiction. A bloody mouth and crooked teeth, bound hands, and the capacity to drive a lover to alcoholism are trademarks of both June Kashpaw and Sweetheart Calico, leading us to suspect their mutual identity.

An elusive character named Sweetheart Calico appears in Louise Erdrich's novel, *The Antelope Wife* (1998). Named for the fabric Klaus Shawano uses to lure her and later tie her, Sweetheart Calico seems at times to be a woman and at other times an antelope. I believe Sweetheart Calico is one of many reincarnated forms of the spirit of June Morrissey Kashpaw, who froze to death on the prairie in Erdrich's first novel.

After her death in the first story of *Love Medicine* (1984,1993), June reappears in Erdrich's other stories, but not always in the same guise. She does, however, always bear some distinguishing trait that identifies her as June Morrissey. The connections, though numerous and intricate, are consistent with American Indian lore as well as Erdrich's fiction. I will attempt to explain the ramifications of June's transformation into a deer and then, in Erdrich's latest novel, an antelope. Jimmy Badger warns, "Some men follow the antelope and lose their minds" (*AW* 29). His ominous statement is intended as a warning to Klaus Shawano, but it could also apply to Gordie Kashpaw, who sees a dead deer turn into his former wife, June, in the backseat of his car in *Love Medicine*.

In order to fathom the depths of Erdrich's fiction, it is helpful to understand the importance of dreams to one's identity and the relation of the individual to nature in American Indian thought. A. Irving Hallowell explains that "Self-related

experiences of the most personal and vital kind include what is seen, heard, and felt in dreams" (Hallowell 165). The significance of the author's dreams, particularly as recounted in her essay "Skunk Dreams," may be crucial to understanding her fiction. Like the elk of Erdrich's own prescient dream, the antelope wife takes on a reality consistent with dreams in Ojibway ontology. I shall address Erdrich's prescient dream in more detail later in this essay.

June's reappearance in various forms corresponds with Ojibway ontology. That she should die at the outset of *Love Medicine* only to become manifest in forms like deer, antelope, and even abstract, natural phenomena is consistent with Native American paradigms as explained by Catherine Rainwater:

Erdrich's texts . . . are also traversed by a conflicting code which has to do with American Indian concepts of individuation that are not based on psychological essence or individual psychology. Especially in *Love Medicine*, characters are formed through various syntagmatic series of references to natural elements such as air, earth, fire, and water As these references imply, Native American individuation occurs in close relationship with nature, whereas Western individuation is conceived as a coherent development of a unique psychological essence present from birth but formed and shaped by civilization. (Rainwater 421)

An understanding of Native American paradigms helps us to fathom Erdrich's fiction. Native American beliefs allow June's spirit to be reincarnated as an antelope or even as the aurora borealis.

While human-to-animal metamorphosis may seem bizarre by Euro-American standards, such occurrences formed an integral part of Native American thought. Lewis Spence explains the Native American reverence for animals as a natural result of their dependence on these creatures for survival:

The Indian, brought into contact with the denizens of the forest and prairie, conceived a high opinion of their qualities and instinctive abilities. . . . In short, he considered them to be his superiors in those faculties which he most coveted and admired. Various human attributes and characteristics became personified and even exaggerated in some of his neighbors of wood and plain. (Spence 80-81)

Thus Erdrich is true to the American Indian culture when she personifies antelope and other animals. But she seems to be verifying the Christian belief in resurrection and the immortality of the soul as well. Even though June dies on Easter weekend at the beginning of *Love Medicine*, her reappearance in altered form could be as much a validation of Native American beliefs as a celebration of Christianity (Rainwater 407).

Although June's animal-human crossover is more overt in *The Antelope Wife* than in any of her previous novels, we do get signs of her animal characteristics in other stories. In *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), June leaves Jack Mauser in the pickup and walks away: "Her step was firm, deerlike, as though she was eager to get where she was going" (TBL 10). Erdrich describes June's step as "deerlike" (TBL 10) just before she freezes to death next to a fence on the prairie. Does she emerge as an antelope on the other side of the fence? Jack finds her body "miles out in the grazing land" (TBL 11). What types of animals graze? Antelope, for one.

In *The Antelope Wife* Klaus Shawano ties his wrist to that of his antelope lover, Sweetheart Calico, with the sweetheart calico fabric: "Lastly, I tie our wrists together and then, beside her in an agony of feeling, I sleep" (AW 30). The antelope wife's bondage recalls June's traumatic ordeal in *The Bingo Palace* (1994). Before the child June is raped in *The Bingo Palace*, her mother ties "her arms and tie[s] her

daughter to the leg of the cast-iron stove" (BP 59). In both cases the female sex object is tied and held against her will. The recurrence of this experience indicates its significance as a defining part of June's self. Whether encountered in the real or the dream world, this traumatic experience remains an integral part of June's self in whatever form she appears.

Having tied his antelope-lover's wrist to his hand in *The Antelope Wife*, Klaus then falls asleep beside her. This scene is reminiscent of "Resurrection" in *Love Medicine*, when June and Gordie are on their honeymoon: "They kissed each other's hands and then folded them together and lay that way, like two people carved on stone caskets, staring up at the starless ceiling" (LM 272). Like June in *The Bingo Palace*, Sweetheart Calico is tied and coerced, and later, like June in "Resurrection," she sleeps peacefully by the side of a lover. Erdrich's "stone casket" simile suggests that this scene, carved in stone, may be a trans-temporal experience for June and Gordie. The connection between June and Gordie has existed, exists, and will exist wherever they are found. In another place or time, they may experience the same moment or an approximation thereof, since this scene, as represented through the connection of their hands, constitutes an integral part of their mutual identity.

"Crown of Thorns" culminates with Gordie waiting for the tribal police "to come with cuffs" (LM 229). Similarly, Klaus repeatedly ties Sweetheart Calico to his wrist. Just as Gordie's relationship with June as the deer involves the handcuffing of his wrists, so Klaus's relationship with the antelope wife involves binding her to his wrist. Klaus is tied to the antelope wife just as Gordie is

symbolically handcuffed to his soul-mate and ex-wife June through his sense of guilt over her death.

At the end of *The Antelope Wife* Klaus once again ties “her hand to his hand gently with the sweetheart calico” (AW 228), and that night they sleep together outside in a scene reminiscent of June and Gordie’s honeymoon in “Resurrection.” The difference here, though, is that we’re not exactly sure what form the antelope wife will take, as her physical characteristics are susceptible to change. The final line of Chapter 2, where Klaus describes “her hand in mine, her wicked hoof” (AW 33), has taught us to expect sudden changes in Sweetheart Calico’s physical appearance. Sweetheart readily changes from human to animal form.

Before Leonard rapes her in *The Bingo Palace*, June’s brother Geezhig awakens her. Geezhig senses trouble brewing. Lucille and her boyfriend Leonard, nicknamed “porcupine,” are drunk. Geezhig says to June, “Run off in the bush. Go on, little sister” (BP 58). Had she, antelope-like, “run off in the bush” (BP 58), Leonard would not have raped her. But even as Leonard does rape her, the language suggests a hooved animal. About Leonard’s fingers Erdrich writes, “They found her, found her, until she galloped against him” (BP 60). The verb “galloped” suggests a hooved animal such as an antelope.

A part of June dies as Leonard rapes her. A young child, she is traumatized by this violation of her innocence and purity. She escapes the dark, abusive real world through her own powerful mind: “Then she was so small she was just a burning dot, a flung star moving, speeding through the blackness, the air, faster and faster and with no letup until she finally escaped into a part of her mind” (BP 60).

Here we see June associated with a star, and we see her entering an interior world of light in order to escape a darker reality. June's figurative death through loss of innocence initiates her escape into another world just as does her actual death.

If June goes from darkness and despair to a brighter realm on the other side of the earth, the antelope seem to be a part of that other, brighter realm as depicted in *The Antelope Wife*. There is a world of light: "The antelope emerge from the band of the light at the world's edge" (*AW* 19). So when June does appear as an antelope, it is on the other side of the fence, in that realm she entered when she left her dead body next to the fence. Her newly released soul has left June's dead body on one side of the fence and entered the antelope's body on the other.

In *Love Medicine* June is changed into a deer before the eyes of the drunken Gordie in "Crown of Thorns." Her animal traits go back to her childhood, when she had survived by eating pine sap in the woods. She also lived with Eli Kashpaw for part of her childhood. Eli has been raised according to the old tribal ways, and is versed in such skills as how to skin and cook a skunk. In "The Beads" Marie describes young June: "Sometimes I thought she was more like Eli. The woods were in June, after all, just like in him, and maybe more. She had sucked on pine sap and grazed grass and nipped buds like a deer" (*LM* 87). The animal traits, the instincts, are ingrained in June from an early age. Here again she is "like a deer" (*LM* 87), just as is an antelope, and just as is Sweetheart Calico.

Much of Sweetheart Calico's life as Klaus's antelope wife mirrors June's life in stories such as "Crown of Thorns" from *Love Medicine*. Attempting to escape the motel room to which Klaus has taken her in Bismarck, North Dakota, the antelope-

woman breaks her teeth on the bathtub. As Klaus ties her with the sweetheart calico fabric he pulls “one strip gently through her bleeding mouth” (*AW* 30). The bleeding mouth is significant for its resemblance to a scene in “Crown of Thorns.” In that scene, a drunken Gordie has called June’s name, although he knows one should never speak the names of the dead. He is in the bathroom shaving when he looks at the window and sees, “Her face. June’s face was there. Wild and pale with a bloody mouth” (*LM* 218). Driven to desperation by her apparition, Gordie frantically flees the house and runs over a deer which turns into June after he puts it in the backseat of his car.

We learn in *Tales of Burning Love* that June has “one tooth, a little crooked, overlapped” (*TB*, 5). While we don’t know how the tooth became crooked, it is consistent with the bloody mouth in *Love Medicine* and in *The Antelope Wife*. The abuse June suffered as a young girl was more the rule than the exception. She tells Albertine in “Love Medicine,” “He hit me good” (*LM* 17). And in “Crown of Thorns” we learn about Gordie, “He’d been a boxer in the Golden Gloves. But what his hands remembered now were the times they struck June” (*LM* 213). June’s apparition seems to be haunting her ex-husband in “Crown of Thorns,” and interestingly enough she later assumes the form of a deer in what could be an attempt to drive him crazy. That the antelope wife, like June, suffers from a bloody mouth is more than mere coincidence where Erdrich’s stories are concerned.

The bottle is another familiar companion to June in Erdrich’s fiction, but usually it is associated with June’s lover. One bottle appears in the final scene where Klaus releases Sweetheart Calico. As Klaus frees his lover from her fetters, “He

threw down the strip of cloth that had tied her to him and then tied him to the bottle” (AW 229). True to Jimmie Badger’s warning, Klaus’s intimate relationship with the alluring antelope wife has proven detrimental to his own health. There seems to be some connection between the antelope wife and Klaus’s drinking problem. As he releases Sweetheart Calico, he also symbolically severs himself from alcohol dependency.

Paula Gunn Allen portrays a similar relationship between man and animal-woman in her short story, “Deer Woman.” Ray and Jackie, the male protagonists, pick up a couple of deer women who prove hazardous in spite of their allure. At the end we learn that Jackie, who persists in his pursuit of one of the deer women, has “gone alcoholic” (Allen 11). Local legends as explained previously by Ray warn “that Deer Woman would come to dances sometimes, and if you weren’t careful she’d put her spell on you and take you inside the mountain to meet her uncle” (Allen 10). While both Allen’s and Erdrich’s stories demonstrate the traditional Native American relationship between man and nature, they are also consistent with American Indian legends of beautiful but dangerous animal-women. In both Allen’s and Erdrich’s stories, involvement with animal-women leads to alcoholism.

Most of the characters intimately involved with June in her various forms abuse alcohol. In *The Bingo Palace* June’s mother, Lucille, is an alcoholic. Her boyfriend Leonard helps Lucille tie June to the stove, and later Leonard rapes June. Just after the two have successfully tied June, a sick Lucille grabs a bottle of booze: “She got the bottle and went off, tilting it over her with every other step” (BP 59). Like Klaus, Leonard and Lucille have drinking problems. And like Klaus, they

restrain June by tying her. A distinct pattern repeats itself for young June, for mature June, and for June reincarnated as the antelope wife. Those with ties to her seem to run into problems, particularly with alcohol.

June's husband, Gordie, in "Crown of Thorns" also has a serious drinking problem. The apparition of June's bloody face chases him from his house. While Gordie drives away in the Malibu, "His mind lit in warped hope on another bottle" (LM 218). But Gordie runs over a deer, which he puts in the backseat of his car, and which later turns into June. Gordie plans to use the meat when he puts the deer into his car: "Someone would trade it for a bottle, even if it was a tough old doe" (LM 219). Gordie hopes to use the doe, which is later transformed in his eyes into June, to procure an alcoholic beverage. Similarly, Lucille and Leonard have previously abused June while imbibing from a bottle of booze, and finally in *The Antelope Wife* Klaus releases June (as Sweetheart Calico) and his dependency on the bottle simultaneously (AW 229). Like the antelope wife with Klaus and like Paula Gunn Allen's deer woman with Jackie, the deer/June has a harmful effect on Gordie. Repeated is the pattern of the male lover driven to drink and to the edge of an emotional abyss by his relationship with an elusive, hooved lover.

If Klaus has an alter ego, it is Gordie. In *The Antelope Wife* Klaus finds another life through sleep: "While he was sleeping, he remembered that he was really someone else with a life and a toothbrush and a paycheck" (AW 224). It is more than coincidental that the description of Klaus sounds like Gordie. In "Crown of Thorns" Gordie had been shaving when he saw June's face in the window; he had left the house, locked himself in the car, and driven away (LM, 218). In *The*

Antelope Wife we get a description of Klaus's dream-world that sounds remarkably like Gordie's world in "Crown of Thorns": "Next, he was shaving, just those few whiskers on the blunt end of his chin. He was walking away from his actual house. Locking his door. Getting into his car" (*AW* 224). The details here are so similar to the events following June's appearance in the window that one must suspect that Klaus is an alter ego for Gordie, just as Sweetheart Calico is an altered form of June.

The concept of a person being in another body, or form, is a common theme in Erdrich's stories. Some characters seem able to leave their bodies and assume other shapes. In describing himself and Sweetheart Calico, Klaus says it is "as though we're wearing other bodies, other people's flaming skins, as though we're from another time and place" (*AW* 31). Sweetheart Calico "leaves off her old skins and buys new, tight and covered with bold designs" (*AW* 31). The ability to change skins, as though one were molting an old body and replacing it with something different, seems to go along with the ability to change shape. At various times Sweetheart Calico becomes a Blue Fairy and a fish underwater, and she also has the ability to encompass her own antelope-children within herself.

While Erdrich's world goes beyond Judeo-Christian standards, it is consistent with traditional Ojibway, or Chippewa, beliefs. A. Irving Hallowell addresses Ojibway beliefs in his essay, "Ojibway Ontology, Behavior, and World View":

Metamorphosis occurs with considerable frequency in the myths where other-than-human persons change their form. Wisekedjak, whose primary characteristics are anthropomorphic, becomes transformed and flies with the geese in one story, assumes the form of a snake in another, and once turns himself into a stump. Men marry "animal" wives who are not "really" animals. (Hallowell 158-59)

Erdrich's stories, like Paula Gunn Allen's, can be considered modern re-creations of Native American myths. Both authors re-create traditional myths within modern settings, imbuing contemporary characters with traits once common in Native American ontology.

Prior to their sexual encounter in *Tales of Burning Love*, Jack thinks of June: "By climbing into her body, he would exist" (*TBL* 9). While this idea could be a reference to sexual intercourse and conception, during which a fetus enables the father's seed to exist within the woman's body, Erdrich often writes about a different kind of spiritual migration. Jeanne Smith addresses this aspect of Erdrich's fiction in her essay on identity in *Love Medicine*:

Love Medicine delineates a selfhood both figuratively and literally transpersonal. Characters flow out of their bodies and open themselves up to engulf the world. Even death does not contain them. (Smith 13)

Erdrich herself addresses the issue of self and identity in her book, *The Blue Jay's Dance*. Written as a chronicle of her experience in becoming a mother, *The Blue Jay's Dance* is Erdrich's only non-fiction narrative. In it she discusses identity from the perspective of a new mother:

One day as I am holding baby and feeding her, I realize that this is exactly the state of mind and heart that so many male writers from Thomas Mann to James Joyce describe with yearning – the mystery of an epiphany, the sense of oceanic oneness, the great yes, the wholeness. There is also the sense of a self merged and at least temporarily erased – it is deathlike. (*BJD* 148)

Consider the qualities Erdrich describes here: "deathlike . . . a self merged and at least temporarily erased . . . epiphany . . . oceanic oneness." These terms could apply to June Morrissey Kashpaw, whose death in Erdrich's first novel results in her

temporary erasure and eventual emergence in other forms periodically throughout Erdrich's fiction.

Before their sexual encounter in "Love Medicine," June sits in the ladies room and thinks about Andy peeling an egg: "All of a sudden she seemed to drift out of her clothes and skin with no help from anyone She felt that underneath it all her body was pure and naked – only the skins were stiff and old" (*LM* 4). She seems already to have left her body, to have reached a state of ecstasy. Ultimately she freezes to death and does leave her corpse in the snow, but we learn that "it didn't matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on" (*LM* 7). The implication here is that June, like a peeled Easter egg, has left her shell. She has molted, and her unfettered soul will go on to other realms, perhaps to become an antelope, Klaus's Sweetheart Calico, or even a more abstract entity like wind, water, or northern lights.

When June enters the other realm, the fence marks a symbolic boundary between the two worlds. In *Love Medicine* she leaves the cold, dark world of drunken despair and enters a bright, new realm. As she leaves her confused, dark world, the one toward which she travels is brighter, perhaps more hopeful: "The snow was bright, giving back starlight" (*LM* 6). And after her Aunt June's death, Albertine Johnson sees June as somehow connected to the aurora borealis. She imagines June as an integral part of the northern lights, "dancing a two-step for wandering souls. Her long legs lifting and falling" (*LM* 37). The image is certainly more cheerful than was June's prior life, and it almost seems as if she has already become a long-legged antelope, "her long legs lifting and falling" (*LM* 37).

In his essay, "An American Indian View of Death," Dennis Tedlock writes of a society of the dead known as the Kachina Society that "those who were members of the Kachina Society might become deer" (Tedlock 269). If the dead can be transformed into deer, then June is certainly eligible. Elk and antelope are biologically very similar to deer, and both are significant within Louise Erdrich's world: the antelope as Sweetheart Calico, Klaus's antelope wife, and the elk as the subject of a significant dream experience which Erdrich describes in an essay entitled "Skunk Dreams" (*The Blue Jay's Dance*, 1995).

Erdrich's essay "Skunk Dreams" suggests one possible motivating factor for transforming June into the antelope wife. Erdrich writes about an extraordinary dream she had in the Rudolph Hotel in Valley City, North Dakota. In her dream she encountered, deep in the woods, a fence behind which was an elk with whom she had "a communion, a long and measureless regard that left [her], on waking, with a sensation of penetrating sorrow" (*BJD* 174). The sorrow seems to indicate loss, as though a part of her had gone off with the elk. The fact that Erdrich later had a real-life experience hauntingly similar to this dream in the New Hampshire woods made it for her a singularly significant experience. It is interesting to note the parallel between the Erdrich/elk connection – their encounter through the fence – and the June/antelope connection – their separation being marked by the fence next to which June dies.

The importance of dreams to Native Americans is somewhat comparable to the significance of dreams in Freudian or Jungian thought. Naming ceremonies, tribal councils, and even everyday decisions (e.g., where to hunt) were decided by

dreams. Here is an historical account which demonstrates their significance to the Chippewa:

The Anishinaabeg did not have written histories; their world views were not linear narratives that started and stopped in manifest binaries. The tribal past lived as an event in visual memories and oratorical gestures; woodland identities turned on dreams and visions. Keeshkemun, a tribal elder, told the colonial officers that he was a bird, "if you wish to know me you must seek me in the clouds." Keeshkemun responded with a dream song when the officers asked him to explain his position in the territorial wars. (Vizenor 24)

In "Skunk Dreams" Erdrich recounts an experience she had while camping out in her sleeping bag, during which a skunk climbed on top of her and took a nap: "Perhaps that night the skunk and I dreamed each other's thoughts or are still dreaming them. To paraphrase the problem of the Chinese sage, I may be a woman who has dreamed herself a skunk, or a skunk still dreaming that she is a woman" (*BJD* 169). Erdrich was obviously fascinated by the idea of a person metamorphosing into an animal, and vice versa. Her depiction of June as the antelope wife, Sweetheart Calico, is consistent with her fascination in spiritual transmigration between species as expressed in *The Blue Jay's Dance*. At one point Erdrich describes deer that "make themselves whole suddenly" (*BJD* 152).

Erdrich's experience in "Skunk Dreams" is curiously similar that of June's son, Lipsha Morrissey who encounters a skunk in *The Bingo Palace*. Lipsha misses his mother at the outset of a spiritual journey to the Pillager land around Matchimanito Lake. He says, "I look around for June, through the trees, toward the road, as if I'd see the flash of the blue car speeding into the mint-conditioned day. But there's no sign of her, no return" (*BP* 194). After fasting several days in the woods, Lipsha's vision quest is rewarded when he is aroused by a skunk on top of

his sleeping bag. Lipsha identifies the animal as “The mother of all skunks. I don’t know why but I think it’s a she” (BP 200). Though the skunk, who speaks the words “This ain’t real estate” (BP 200), could be Fleur Pillager, it seems more likely a reincarnated form of Lipsha’s mother, June Morrissey Kashpaw. Lipsha has been missing his mother, and her appearance in the guise of a skunk at this point in the story logically follows with a mother’s interest in her son, as well as with Lipsha’s identification of the animal as “the mother of all skunks” (BP 200). The skunk’s remark is consistent with the Native American concept of land as belonging to all creatures rather than as a commodity, like real estate, that can be bought and sold.

June assumes the role of a guardian angel in *Tales of Burning Love*. The final lines of the novel address June’s difficulties in the afterlife: “It had not been easy for her, for June, when she froze to death, no. But it was also hard to bear the pain of coming back to life” (TBL 452). It has indeed been difficult for June, who was resurrected in *Tales of Burning Love* and subsequently fought to help save her son, Lipsha, and Jack Mauser, Jr. from freezing to death in a North Dakota blizzard. June experiences different hardships in *The Antelope Wife*, where we see her as Sweetheart Calico separated from her children and made a prisoner of love by Klaus Shawano. Her reappearance in her own image in *Tales of Burning Love* contrasts with June’s other reincarnations in animal forms and even as abstract natural phenomena.

Erdrich’s depiction of June’s spirit travelling from one world to another reminds us of the description in *The Blue Jay’s Dance* of deer that “make themselves whole suddenly” (BJD 152), except that June’s entry happens more dramatically.

2

After Gordie sees her face in the window in *Love Medicine*'s "Crown of Thorns," he plugs in a toaster. Although it seems at first that there has been an electrical short-circuit, the subsequent explosion results from June's presence entering the room like lightning: "There was a loud crack. Darkness. A ball of red light fell in his hands. Everything went utterly silent, and she squeezed through the window in that instant" (LM 218). "She" is June, although she seems to assume no definite shape in this scene. After her entry into the bathroom, Gordie leaves the house and hits a deer with his Malibu.

Chapter 5 of *The Antelope Wife*, "Sweetheart Calico," seems remarkably like June's entry into Gordie Kashpaw's bathroom in "Crown of Thorns": "A ball of heat flung her through the window, dragging melted plastic shower curtains that in snow hardened to the shape of her body as she loped crazily through the park" (AW 51). In this scene the antelope wife is "flung . . . through the window" (AW 51). In "Crown of Thorns" we learn that June "squeezed through the window in that instant" (LM 218). When she goes through the window, the antelope wife is associated with "a ball of heat" (AW 51). When June goes through the bathroom window in "Crown of Thorns," we learn of Gordie that "a ball of red light fell in his hands" (LM 218). Though we are not told the antelope wife is in a bathroom, we do know that she is "dragging melted plastic shower curtains" (AW 51), a detail which suggests she is or has been in a bathroom.

Although this short chapter, "Sweetheart Calico," seems to concern the antelope wife, the closing lines give what could easily be the doe's point of view as she is run over by an automobile: "The lights and car panic tangled her. Streets

opened onto streets and the highways roared hungry as swollen rivers, bearing in their rush dangerous bright junk" (*AW* 52). Is this the antelope wife, or is it the doe, the "sudden ghost" (*LM*, 218), that Gordie runs over in "Crown of Thorns"? The scenes are remarkably congruent, and both suggest June's ghost-like ability to assume different shapes quickly.

The language describing Gordie's death at the end of "Resurrection" imitates the descriptions of June as she rushes "pure and naked" (*LM* 7) from one realm to another: "... his heart quit, he went tight through with a blast like heat" (*LM* 275). As with the antelope wife and June in "Crown of Thorns," the heat or light represents the soul or spirit, which apparently leaves one realm, or body, and enters another. June's metamorphic abilities are consistent with those here attributed to her ex-husband, Gordie.

No other character besides June, however, maintains such a ubiquitous presence in Erdrich's stories. While her identity may not always be obvious, an understanding of June's uncanny ability to change shape can greatly enhance our understanding of Erdrich's fiction. Writing specifically of *Love Medicine*, Karen Castellucci Cox in "Magic and Memory in the Story Cycle: Gloria Naylor and Louise Erdrich" recognizes that, "While she is physically dead within the first six pages of the book, June's specter hangs over the lives of the others – all stories get read through the lens of her spiritual presence" (Cox 166). While her assessment of June's role in *Love Medicine* is certainly accurate, Cox's statement is equally applicable to June's role in Erdrich's fiction as a whole.

June's "pure and naked" soul (*LM* 7), able to assume different shapes such as Sweetheart Calico and the antelope wife, is also at times associated with a vastness as large as life itself. Her illegitimate son, Lipsha, describes her thus at the end of the last section of *Love Medicine*, "Crossing the Water": "If it made any sense at all, she was part of the great loneliness being carried up the driving current" (*LM* 366). June is at various times a deer, a skunk, Sweetheart Calico, the antelope wife, and perhaps even Erdrich herself and the elk she dreamed she communed with through a fence. On yet another level, June could be said to represent the aurora borealis, lightning, a star, the wind, or water.

Just as Lipsha says of June in *The Bingo Palace*, "She is anyone, everyone" (*BP* 53), so Klaus describes Sweetheart Calico in *The Antelope Wife* as the embodiment of all her antelope children: "She is all of them rolled up in one person, I figure" (*AW* 25). June also vicariously represents the fulfillment of Erdrich's own dreams. Like all of us, Erdrich dislikes the thought of death as closure, as an end to our mortal existence. She would like to think that she, like June, can emerge on the other side of the fence as an antelope, gracefully prancing across the prairie in a continuation of her vital existence. Erdrich clearly states her own dream in the essay "Skunk Dreams": "I want something of the self on whom I have worked so hard to survive the loss of the body" (*BJD* 169).

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Vita

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